

## The Great Lichfield Library Wrap



Image by Amelia Brown Photography 2017

You might know that Lichfield in Staffordshire boasts the only three-spired Cathedral in the country. But you might not know that this unusual building also possesses the only two-storey chapter house in the UK. This octagon-shaped structure, dating from the mid thirteenth century, has a beautiful ten-celled roof vaulted from a central pillar and, like the rest of the Cathedral, is built of local red sandstone.

Unfortunately, in recent years the chapter house roof has suffered from water penetration.

Scheduled for planned repairs in 2020, it became clear in late 2016 that the lead covering was no longer waterproof and significant damage was being sustained. Immediate action was needed, and it was clear that this was not going to be a cheap or easy job. Nevertheless, after an intense emergency funding appeal, work was able to go ahead in early 2017.

Quite apart from the cost of the renovation and repairs to the structure of the building, there was one major hurdle to overcome before work could begin. Lichfield Cathedral Chapter House is home to the extraordinary collection of books and manuscripts making up the internationally important Library on its upper floor. Among thousands of precious volumes is the jewel in Lichfield's crown: the eighth-century St Chad Gospels.

To complicate matters even more the bookshelves and cabinets of the Library rest upon a rare example of a complete 13<sup>th</sup> century encaustic tiled floor; one of the finest anywhere. Serious discussions ensued and the bold safety-first decision was taken by the Cathedral to completely remove all of the books and manuscripts into the kind of temporary safe off-site storage suited to such valuable artefacts. This unprecedented decision meant that the contents of the Library would leave the building for the first time since the Reformation.

Clare Townsend the Cathedral Libraries Manager takes up the tale. "While the thought of carrying out major building works on the roof above the Library with the Collection inside was causing me sleepless nights, the magnitude of the work involved in evacuating the entire contents was a completely different headache. As always, budgets were extremely tight, and the cost of using a professional company to wrap, pack and remove the Collection in the time available was simply out of the question. However, with the help of our Arts Society volunteers, together with other staunch



supporters of the Cathedral, we knew we could do it. A plan was made and a schedule drawn up to complete the work by the deadline of the middle of June. For technical reasons however, we couldn't actually begin the project until mid March, so it was going to be a massive challenge. But there was no other way to ensure the safety of the wonderful treasures we have in our care."

The project was guided by expert advice from Arts Society Libraries Consultant Caroline Bendix, using the protocols laid down in her book on the subject of moving collections, published by the British Library. All volunteers, including the members of the existing Arts Society Heritage Project team, received training on the correct way to approach the rather intimidating task ahead. Above all, preventing damage to any of the items in the Collection was vital. Strong, conservation-grade acid-free paper was folded carefully around each volume. Each one, now rather closely resembling a chip packet, was placed carefully into special boxes so as to ensure as little stress on the bindings as possible. The contents were then cross-referenced with the Catalogue, and then each box was closed and barcoded to create an accurate inventory of the material removed from site.

Those volumes too large or heavy to be safely handled in boxes were dealt with in a slightly different way. Each was wrapped separately in paper, as with the books, but then covered in at least ten layers of bubblewrap to minimise the possibility of damage during handling. Finally, each one was also individually barcoded.

Volunteers worked in shifts to make sure that progress was made as safely and as quickly as possible and, amazingly, the entire process was completed within three months.



As the last day dawned before the removal company arrived to take everything down the thirty-six steps of the spiral staircase to ground level, time was running out. But, as Clare explained, “in a state of euphoria that we were nearly there, I’d told the team of volunteers the day before that I felt able to cope with the last little bit of barcoding. They were all finally free to return to their normal lives. However, I must have miscalculated because by the afternoon I was really struggling with the last thirty or so boxes. Just as I was beginning to despair, to my immense relief, Migo Wood (an Arts Society volunteer and past Chair of Stafford

DFAS) appeared in the doorway to save the day. I could have kissed her!”

In all, over eight thousand items were wrapped and packed. Over six hundred barcodes were used and Arts Society and Cathedral volunteers gave over four hundred hours of their time.

Clare is emphatic: “without our amazing Arts Society volunteers from Needwood, Stafford, Solihull and Stratford-upon-Avon branches, we couldn’t possibly have managed such a huge project. They, and our other volunteers deserve our enormous thanks and appreciation for this, and the work that they do all year behind the scenes to ensure that our treasures are maintained and kept available for public view.”

“Deadlines were met, the Collection removed, and work on the roof is well under way. All we have to think about now is how we’re going to unpack it, ready to open our public library tours when the Collection can return, hopefully in summer 2018!”

Janet Wheeler  
January 2017